

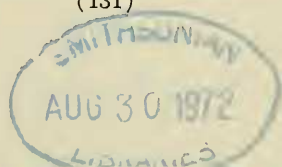
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THE NOMENCLATURE OF *PIPILO ABERTI* BAIRD
(AVES: FRINGILLIDAE)

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Pipilo aberti, or Abert's Towhee, was described from an apparently dataless and now lost specimen from the collection of Lt. James W. Abert, for whom the species is named (Baird, 1852). For over a century the type-locality was assumed to be in the eastern part of the species' range, and probably in New Mexico. Recently, Phillips (1962) rejected this assessment and instead designated the type-locality in the western reaches of the range, in the vicinity of Gila Bend, Maricopa County, Arizona. With this shift Phillips renamed the eastern race as *P. a. vorhiesi* Phillips (type-locality: ca. 15 km south of Tucson, Arizona), and made *P. a. dumeticolus* van Rossem (type-locality: 3 miles northwest of Calexico, Imperial County, California) a synonym of the newly nominate western race. Although Phillips' proposals have been accepted by Paynter (1970: 179), a further examination of them and other details is desirable.

One of Phillips' bases for rejecting an eastern type-locality for *P. aberti* is his assertion that Baird's original description fits the western rather than the eastern race of the species. There are two races of *P. aberti*, a paler and redder western form and a darker and grayer eastern form. While not extremely well marked, the two are nevertheless sufficiently distinct for formal recognition as subspecies. (Some question exists over the geographic limits of the two, but Phillips with



better material is probably correct in extending the Colorado Valley race eastward along the Gila River to central Arizona.) Phillips (ibid.: 364) assigns the type to the western population on the basis that the original description “. . . *hace hincapié en el dorso moreno-oriniento del tipo, que no destacaba de los lados del cuello o de las partes inferiores.*” (i.e., “. . . lays emphasis on the type's rusty-brown dorsum, which is not set off from the sides of the neck or the underparts.”). What Baird (1852: 325) actually said was “colour above. . . a nearly uniform rusty-brown, *or* (italics mine) olive, . . . ; beneath, and on the sides of the neck, the colour is much like that of the back, [but] with a stronger tinge of ferruginous, . . . which becomes very decided about the lower tail coverts.” Phillips' interpretation of Baird's statements is of a uniformly rusty-brown bird (which would suggest western *P. aberti*), but as can be seen from above this assessment is not accurate. The color of the upperparts of the type was given by Baird as rusty-brown *or* olive, which is ambiguous because the two hues are not generally considered to be very similar. I think this ambiguity, or at least lack of clarity, invalidates any claim that the type of *P. aberti* is assignable to subspecies level on the basis of dorsal coloration. Furthermore, Baird *does* imply contrast between the upperparts and the lower parts (including the sides of the neck), contrary to Phillips. Rather than arguing that this would more likely refer the type to the eastern race, however, I would simply contend that the original description does not allow one to single out either race.

The ambiguity or lack of clarity in the original description is not the only factor which undermines its value in assessing the subspecific identity of the type. For example, not only is color variation subtle in this species, but it is subject to various post-mortem changes as reviewers since van Rossem (1946) have been aware. The condition of the type is not precisely known, but the bird had suffered some mutilation (Baird 1852: 325) and may well have been unsatisfactory for determination of subspecific identity. In the catalog of the United States National Museum it bore the notation: “was in mounted series in 1863 and was marked as ‘bad’ and to be replaced.”

These facts do not evoke confidence in the finer points of Baird's description, and there is at least a suggestion that the type may have been a mounted bird (and thus subject to fading, soiling, etc.) at the time he examined it. When one considers the above factors, plus our lack of knowledge of the age, sex, and plumage wear of the type, the task of identifying Abert's specimen to a given population becomes one of extreme speculation. In fact, based on the present evidence, it would appear impossible to justify such a determination, and therefore Phillips' (1962) assessment is rejected. Thus the question of designating a type-locality of *P. aberti* must rest on grounds other than Baird's original description. This being the case, the matter would then hinge mainly on a satisfactory reconstruction of the possible origin of the type.

Phillips (1962), as well as Davis (1951), expressed doubt that Lt. Abert himself had collected the type of *P. aberti*, and judging from his itinerary (Cooke, in Bailey 1928: 17-18) they probably are correct. Abert was never in the present range of the species, the closest approach being in the Rio Grande Valley at Valverde, Socorro County, New Mexico. That point is about 110 miles northeast of the nearest population of *P. aberti*, in the Gila Valley of New Mexico. Of course, it is possible that the type was a stray, as Cooke (ibid.: 718) suggests, but Abert (1882) made no mention of the species among those seen in New Mexico in 1846-47. Davis (1951) suggested that Abert may have received the bird from members of a U. S. Army expedition that entered the Gila Valley in October 1846. Abert was to have been a member of that expedition, but illness prevented him from joining it (Cooke, ibid.: 17). He did follow it as far as south of Valverde, however, and would certainly have been in the path of men turning back to Santa Fe from the Gila Valley in the autumn of 1846.

Phillips (1962), partly because of his opinion on the sub-specific allocation of the type, suggests another possible origin of the specimen. He mentions that Col. John J. Abert also provided specimens to the United States National Museum, and from their localities it seems that he was better traveled than Lt. Abert, including probably to Mazatlán, Sinaloa, Mex-

ico, and perhaps Hawaii. Had Col. Abert, or someone he knew, traveled to Mazatlán, Phillips surmises that he would have passed through southern Arizona. This hypothetical traveler would probably have stopped at the villages of the Pima Indians near the present Gila Bend, where *P. aberti* would have been less shy and more vulnerable to casual collecting. There, Phillips thinks that the specimen of the species could have been collected and subsequently found its way to Baird.

Discounting the subspecific allocation of the type of *P. aberti*, Phillips' basis for designating the type-locality as to Pima villages rests mainly on his supposition that the species must have been taken where it was presumably most available. There are numerous species which have been described from vagrants or at least from parts of their range where they were not the most common, so that availability alone cannot be the deciding criterion. We have no evidence that Col. Abert, who was the father of Lt. Abert, did indeed enter southern Arizona or knew anyone who did. The specimens from Mazatlán could just as well have been taken by a maritime as an overland traveler. Since they were not cataloged (as were Lt. Abert's birds) at the United States National Museum until 1859, there is no assurance that they have a bearing on *P. aberti*, described 7 years earlier. On the other hand, Baird (1852: 308) specifically stated that the small collection containing *P. aberti* was procured by Lt. Abert, although it was Col. Abert who permitted Baird to examine and publish on the material. The implication is that Col. Abert turned the specimens over to Baird with the belief that his son had taken them in New Mexico and that they were relevant to Baird's report. Incidentally, had Baird been correct in his assumption that Lt. Abert himself discovered *P. aberti* (which we may now doubt), the type-locality would have to be in the present boundaries of New Mexico and not in the larger area that included Arizona.

If one assumes that the type of *P. aberti* was acquired by Lt. Abert rather than his father and that Lt. Abert himself did not collect it, a probable source, as already mentioned, would have been the U. S. Army expedition to the Gila Valley.

Members of that expedition included both W. H. Emory and A. R. Johnston, who made biological notes on the trip, collected plants, and made scientific drawings (Emory, 1848). They entered the Gila Valley on 20 October 1846 and were thus among the very first naturalists to penetrate the range of *P. aberti*. They are not definitely known to have taken birds, but they made ornithological observations and the collection of occasional avian specimens would not have been unexpected. Such specimens may have later found their way into the hands of Lt. Abert, including not only the type of *P. aberti* but also two other species reported in his collection by Baird (1852), but not mentioned by Abert (1882): *Lophortyx gambelii* and *Zenaidura asiatica*. Both Emory and Johnston mention the former as being numerous on the first date of entry into the Gila Valley, and it is conceivable that the specimen was taken then. The specimen of *Zenaidura asiatica* would more likely have come from farther west, but H. W. Henshaw (1874) reported taking one in the New Mexico portion of the Gila Valley on 28 October 1873, so that one cannot entirely discount the possibility of Emory's expedition having taken it there.

Of course, even if one accepts this suggested origin of the type of *P. aberti*, there is no way of conclusively establishing where it was taken. The expedition followed the length of the Gila River in moving westward, thus crossing the ranges of both races of the species (including at the Pima villages). On the other hand, there is no reason to assume that the two naturalists would have been unable to collect *P. aberti* in the eastern parts of its range, even in the face of its shyness there. Frank Stephens (Stevens [sic], 1878) was to find the bird common in the Gila Valley of New Mexico in 1876, and there is no reason to think it was less numerous or less detectable 30 years earlier by Emory's party. In fact, one might be tempted to choose an eastern origin of the type on the assumption that the earlier in the autumn of 1846 the specimen of *P. aberti* was taken, the more likely it is to have been sent back to Lt. Abert. There are, however, more compelling reasons for accepting an eastern type locality.

We are faced with two theories regarding the geographic origin of the type of *P. aberti*, but on the basis of evidence summarized above I feel that neither is clearly superior to the other. Acceptance of this assessment means that the choice of one over the other rests on other bases. Considering the interest of preserving nomenclatural stability within *P. aberti*, the traditional concept of an eastern origin of the type is obviously the better choice. Workers accepted this concept for 110 years, including van Rossem, the first reviser and describer of subspecies (1946), and Davis, the second and most thorough reviser (1951). Van Rossem tacitly accepted the assessment of the general type-locality by such workers as Baird (1852) and Cooke (*in* Bailey, 1928) as New Mexico (and perhaps in the Rio Grande Valley). Davis concurred with the general area being New Mexico, but suggested the Gila Valley (possibly near Cliff or Redrock) as the probable source without formally designating such. Because Phillips (1952) has produced no compelling evidence for overturning the traditional concept and the earlier name *P. a. dumeticolus*, I feel that his proposed type-locality of Gila Bend, Arizona, should be rejected. In its stead I am designating as the type-locality the first place at which the Emory expedition entered the range of *P. aberti*: the Gila Valley at the mouth of Mangas Creek, ca. 7 miles south of Cliff, Grant County, New Mexico. *P. a. vorhiesi* Phillips thus becomes a synonym of the nominate race, as Tucson birds are similar to those of New Mexico.

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